

SUEZ AND THE BRITISH CONSCIENCE

A Personal Report

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INTERNATIONAL events move so fast that one's perspective on them alters weekly, perhaps even daily. By the time these lines (written in the third week of February) are in print, things may have happened in the Middle East which will throw new light on all that was said and done in the late autumn of last year. But even so, it remains important to understand what moved people's minds in the critical days and weeks, because the repercussions of what was said and done may influence all our lives for years to come, and influence in particular the future course of Anglo-American relations.

Such an attempt at reconstruction is bound to be subjective, and anyone who undertakes it ought to furnish his credentials when writing for a public which does not know him. Let me make it clear, then, that the present writer is a teacher of history and politics by profession, a British subject by birth, a Jew though not identified with Zionism, and a member of the British Liberal party though not actively engaged in politics.

I do not propose to attempt here an answer to the kind of questions which the political journalist asks today, and which the historian may be able to answer in fifty or a hundred years' time—such questions as the extent to which the Anglo-French ultimatum was prepared; whether there was

"collusion" with Israel; why the military operations took so long to get started, and what were the precise considerations which led the British and French governments to call off operations which from the local military point of view seemed just about to achieve total success with the complete occupation of the Canal Zone. On all these points, a real margin of doubt is still possible. To other questions—for instance, the precise intentions of the Soviet Union had operations continued—we may never know the full answer, unless the Soviet regime like the Nazi regime one day yields up its secrets in collapse.

The kind of problem that I am concerned with here involves rather different things, below the level of cabinets and general staffs. It is the problem of what might be called the fragmentation of opinion and its regrouping—in Britain primarily, but also in the United States. How did the two governments that were the principal upholders of the Atlantic alliance get into a position where one found it necessary to conceal its purposes from the other and act without consultation, while the other found itself co-operating in the United Nations with its sworn enemies against its erstwhile, yet presumably future, allies? How did a British Conservative government find itself opposed in a vital area of policy by a Republican government in the United States? And how was it that such support and understanding as the British case found were mainly on what might be called the "left" in American politics? Was it more than a case of the Democrats seizing upon a Republican blunder? On the other hand, how was it that the British Labor party, traditionally suspicious of American "capitalism," found itself backing the United States against the

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British government; how was it that the leader of a party which had shown much sympathy for Israel as a successful exponent of social democracy could brand Israel as an "aggressor" along with Britain and France, and be followed in this by all but a very few of his parliamentary supporters, while more extreme elements gave the Egyptian dictator well nigh their full support? And how was it that in Britain one might easily find oneself in the opposite camp from one's personal friends and professional and political associates?

In considering these questions we may come to a better understanding of some of the main dilemmas of British and American policy in our time; and it will certainly not be possible to rebuild the Atlantic alliance in any enduring way unless they are faced. We should not pretend to be in agreement where we are not.

IN CONSIDERING the British side of the matter, two preliminary points deserve to be made. The first of these would be obvious to anyone who lived through the critical weeks in Britain, but seems to be less clear to one's friends in the United States. This is the fact that the Suez-Sinai episode, insofar as it caused a "crisis of conscience" in Britain, was very much an affair of the intellectuals. The broad masses of popular opinion whose leanings are registered by the pollsters were hardly moved from their accustomed political allegiances. This does not mean that the failure of British policy and the hardships arising out of it may not have affected the government's strength in the electorate, or may not do so even more in the future if no "solution" is found. It does mean that, at the time, the indignation over the government's action voiced on prudential or moral grounds by some of its intellectual and even some of its parliamentary supporters was compensated for, and probably more than compensated for, electorally, by the general British dislike of Colonel Nasser and his activities, and the widespread feeling that it was time he and his like were taught a lesson.

It is understandable, therefore, that the first impulse of the Labor leaders—to treat the Suez intervention as an opportunity for a mass campaign to force the government out of office by providing proof that it had lost all support—turned out to be quite unproductive. The storms whipped up by the *Manchester Guardian* and the *London Observer*, and the more temperate but equally firm opposition of the *Economist*, reflected no doubt the opinions of much, though by no means all, of their own rather sophisticated readership; but the electoral depths remained relatively unstirred. In this sense the impact was much less than that of the Spanish Civil War or of the Munich crisis of two decades ago.

The other point that must be made is that even within the "intellectual" circles where the debate raged, Suez had no monopoly of British attention. Indeed, the whole thing cannot be understood without taking into account the simultaneous development of the situation in Hungary. In the first place, there was the general feeling of frustration caused by the realization that here were events of the greatest moment to us all, a genuine crisis in the heart of the Communist world, about which we could do nothing positive. Indeed, it can be said categorically that for the youngest generation of intellectuals, the students, who were not plagued with their seniors' memories of earlier moral dilemmas over foreign policy, Hungary was and remained the real issue, far transcending Suez. It was in the "senior" not the "junior" common rooms in the Oxford colleges that the Middle East claimed the center of attention. Perhaps this was because relief work and the collection of funds for Hungary could provide outlets for youthful idealism; perhaps it was because students themselves had taken so important a part in the Hungarian rising; perhaps it was only because the issue was better suited to youth, as being more clear-cut with no awkward balancing of right and wrong. At any rate, the difference in attitude is admitted on both sides.

For older people, the important thing was

to show that the two issues were connected, so that concentration on the wrongdoing of their own government and the French, rather than on the Soviet barbarities, could be justified. This took the extreme form of saying that the Russians would not have dared to act as they had if not for Anglo-French "aggression" at Suez. That the two events were not directly connected in this way can actually be demonstrated by a quite simple exercise in chronology. The British and French ultimatum was delivered on October 30; on the very same day, large-scale reinforcements of Soviet troops, some of which must have left their bases several days earlier, began crossing into Hungary in preparation for the treacherous attack on the Nagy government on November 4. In other words, the Soviet government must have decided before the Anglo-French intervention that it could not afford to allow the course of events in Hungary to proceed in a democratic and neutralist direction. Nor is this surprising.

Soviet policy, it will be generally agreed, acts in accordance with its own conception of self-interest, irrespective of any external legal or moral considerations. The Soviet government clearly could not see how it was possible to tolerate a country's turning its back upon the proletarian revolution after a whole decade of Communist rule without that revolution's entire mystique being called into question. What decided the issue was Soviet internal politics and considerations about the future of the Soviet zone. It clearly suited the Soviet book to join in the hue and cry against Israel, Britain, and France. It may indeed be true that in so doing Russia helped to blunt in some quarters the edge of indignation against her own actions. But the double standard so often applied by members of the Afro-Asian bloc where Western and Communist actions are concerned makes it unlikely that even this was of the first importance.

IT is also unlikely that the Soviet threats had much to do with the British decision to terminate operations in the Suez area.

Knowing the Soviet Union's general tone in such matters, and given the crisis in Eastern Europe, an area far more vital to itself, one can hardly believe that it was going to risk a major war for the sake of Egypt when most of what it wanted in the Middle East could be acquired with so much less risk. This is a historical parenthesis; the main thing to be emphasized is the depth of feeling which made it possible for the British government's opponents to use the sufferings of Hungary as a stick to beat that government with. No one has yet suggested how, short of the West's using force, Hungary could have been saved, or pointed to any evidence in Europe or America that, if not for Suez, force would have indeed been used.

It would be wrong, however, because they were clearly guilty of self-deception on the Hungarian issue, to belittle either the strength or the sincerity of the intellectuals' opposition to the Anglo-French action. Condemnation of Israel was a little less strong from the beginning; some of those who condemned the Anglo-French action admitted that continued acts of hostility against Israel and threats of more trouble were extenuating circumstances—some even expressed the view that the whole thing was a clumsy and unnecessary interference, and that so far from there having been "collusion" with Israel, Britain and France would have done better by letting her get on with the job. Here of course we approach the school of criticism which concentrated on the incompetence shown in the action taken, rather than on its alleged "immorality."

The main lines upon which the British government was attacked at home were nearly all developed within a very few days of the ultimatum itself and well before the actual landings. To take Oxford as an index to the general course of intellectual opinion: by midday on November 3, four days after the ultimatum, 325 "dons" had signed a resolution deploring the government's action on the grounds that it was morally wrong, endangered the solidarity of the Commonwealth, put a grave strain upon the Atlantic

alliance, and was a flagrant violation of the principles of the UN charter. Later the number of signatories rose to 350. The counter-offensive took longer to mount and the signatories to a rival resolution were often more prepared to question the right of the government's opponents to be so categorical, and the propriety of criticizing policy once British troops were actually engaged, than to affirm the wisdom as such of the government's decision. A resolution drafted to allow for this line of thought obtained 136 signatures. Significantly, the total of signatures obtained on both sides was well under half of those qualified to sign. Most Oxford dons refrained from committing themselves on a contentious political issue, and it may be presumed that the abstentionists did not include any large number of persons who felt morally outraged by what had been done.

The reactions described will be familiar to Americans. What may be less fully appreciated is the relative order of importance given to them in Britain. The most obvious difference is the fact that the existence of the United Nations was not only the last of the reasons given for disapproving the government's action, but was, for most people, probably the least convincing; and insofar as it was an important argument it took the form of saying that the principles of the Charter had been violated, rather than of claiming that the existence of the United Nations as an organization had made such single-handed action unnecessary. The latter argument, though advanced by certain Socialist leaders in the course of political debate, rarely aroused any important echo in the country.

The reason for this is clear. The United Nations never has attracted the same measure of popular support in Britain that the League of Nations enjoyed in its heyday. It has never been the focus of public attention; its personalities have never captured the headlines as did Briand, Stresemann, or Chamberlain in the great days of the League. New York is still farther away from London than Geneva. Even more important

has been the fact that almost from the beginning, the United Nations has been thought of in a hard-headed way as the scene of political bargaining among the powers carried on in their own national interest. Even the Korean war is thought of, not as a United Nations blow for collective security, but as a part of the resistance to Communism of the United States and its allies. It may be added in parenthesis that the conduct of the United Nations between ceasefire in Egypt and the time of writing has still further lowered its prestige, so that insofar as the American government is committed to "working through" the United Nations, the gap between America and Britain is wider than ever.

ON THE other hand, many of the government's more sophisticated opponents acted on the assumption that Britain's only hope for the future lay in remaining a junior partner in a permanent Anglo-American alliance. There is probably no element in Britain as "America-conscious" as the university dons. The idea that Britain should lose American friendship over an action of this kind was quite unbearable for them and they reacted accordingly.

Much surprise and indeed consternation was caused in the ranks of the British government's opponents over Suez when the name of Gilbert Murray appeared on the list of those signing the counter-resolution at Oxford. Dr. Murray has always been regarded in Britain as a symbol of devotion to the idea of collective security, first through the League of Nations and latterly through the UN. For this highly respected veteran to "change sides" was something of a sensation. Yet Dr. Murray did not in his own view act inconsistently with his beliefs and principles. He took the view that once the Security Council had failed to act because of divergences between the great powers, it was impossible for the Western nations to accept the word of the General Assembly as law; the latter would be swayed by the votes of countries of a lower degree of political development, incapable of exer-

cising leadership, and prone to be moved only by the narrowest and most short-sighted of considerations. In other words, the Wilsonian conception to which he regarded himself as faithful was predicated, he believed, upon a hierarchy of nations in which the most advanced would, through international organizations, take the lead in preserving peace and promoting international justice. The rule of the General Assembly in circumstances of great power competition puts too much authority in the hands of those least qualified to use it responsibly. That the slave-holders of Saudi Arabia should sit in judgment upon Britain or France or Israel was quite unacceptable.

It is worth while recalling Dr. Murray's arguments because they represent almost the precise opposite of what I believe to have been the main emotional force behind the opposition to the government: the extraordinary strength of the "anti-imperialism" or "anti-colonialism" which has come to possess "enlightened" intellectual circles. Only their "anti-colonial" feelings could have drowned the sympathies normally felt for Israel among British intellectuals, particularly those on the left. When the government's opponents declared that what Britain and France were doing was an outrage to morality, they did not mean simply to condemn the use of force for the furtherance of national interests: they meant to condemn it quite especially because Egypt was a non-white, non-European, "under-developed" country. In the same way, when they asserted, quite correctly, that the policy was putting a great strain on Commonwealth relations, they were thinking not of Australia and New Zealand, who supported Britain, or even of Canada, which was politically all-important, but of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon.

In other words, while an earlier generation, even of liberal-minded men like Dr. Murray, were on the whole proud of what Europeans had done to bring civilization to other parts of the globe, younger men are conscience-stricken about the evils which accompanied the process, skeptical about its

alleged motives, and proud, if at all, only of the fact that Britain has more rapidly than other colonial powers accepted the necessity of a severance of all imperial ties. No argument was heard more often than the one that the Suez action had interrupted the smooth process of substituting relations of equality for those of "white" domination in the whole Asian and African world.

In the extreme case of the *London Observer*, which is typical of a certain British intellectual point of view, one got the impression that the black (brown or yellow) man was always right and the white man always wrong. This was not the same thing as American "anti-colonialism," which, being a sentiment hitherto directed against other great powers, need not conflict with the national interest and does not involve any kind of self-abasement or atonement for past sins. This British attitude is more emotional than that and more violent in its expression, and differentiates "intellectuals" from non-intellectuals in Britain.

A refusal to go along with a majority of one's closest colleagues and friends or to follow the lead given by one's own political party always involves a certain examination of one's own thinking and impulses. In my case I was made to do this in a rather conscious fashion when the research students of my college asked me to talk to them about my own views. I did so on November 9—three days after the cease-fire. If I now present the arguments I used at that time in a necessarily abbreviated form, they may serve to show what the "other side" then thought.

MY FIRST point was that my political reactions had always been colored by the thought that, like so many of my own undergraduate contemporaries of the early 1930's, I had supported the celebrated resolution that we would not "fight for King and country." The belief that the dictators were subsequently encouraged in their careers of violence and evil by such manifestations of pacifism has given people like me a sense of guilt; and although we may

respect the genuine pacifist who is willing to carry the teachings of non-violence to their ultimate conclusions, we can never be satisfied with a muddled half-way position. Americans, who do not think of themselves as having been involved in the "appeasement" policies of the 1930's, tended to misunderstand the nature of the Hitler-Nasser parallel that is so vivid in British minds.

Politics can never be wholly brought within the field of morality, since it inevitably involves a choice between evils. A government responsible to its people must take what action it believes will best serve them; it cannot be governed by the same considerations that its members might rightly apply to their own private affairs. Again, while in private concerns we seek the judge who is most impartial and most removed from any direct connection with the cause he is trying, in politics we do no such thing. And this has obvious consequences for one's view on the rights and duties of international organizations.

The Middle East itself is not an area where peace can be preserved or justice done without action. Too many forces—nascent nationalism, Communism, and the sheer pace of social change—jostle each other within a political system largely accidental in its contours and wholly inadequate to direct the forces at work to constructive ends. Quite apart from the general problems which the Middle East shares with other underdeveloped countries, it has at least one special problem, the existence in Israel of a country which its neighbors are sworn to annihilate. Unless one is willing to believe that the West, which created Israel, is willing to see it destroyed, this puts a distinct limit upon the extent to which here at least a settlement by agreement is possible. Not only had the United Nations failed to produce a settlement of the major question, but it had hopelessly failed to handle the subsidiary issues arising out of the Arab-Israel conflict: the resettlement of the refugees, the prevention of border raiding, and the securing of the free navigation

at sea and in the Suez Canal that it had admitted to be Israel's right.

Hitherto the West had been content to do little more than keep things as they were in the Middle East while trying to avert the "second round." The rise of Colonel Nasser put an end to the possibility of relying on this passivity. However beneficent his own original intentions toward his people, he had, like other dictators before him, been driven along the path of external aggressiveness to conceal failures at home. The elimination of Israel was to be only part of a general campaign to evict the West from the Middle East as a whole, and in so doing he was receiving aid from the Soviet bloc. He might genuinely desire not to be a Soviet satellite, but the path he was taking left him no alternative.

FOR me, the case against the British government lay in the breach caused in Anglo-American relations. But unlike the government's critics, I was aware of the fact that, much as we in Europe might like to see the growth in America's awareness of the interdependence of the world matched by a greater willingness to undertake specific responsibilities, there were great obstacles to this happening in an area like the Middle East. "Anti-colonialism" stood in the way.

The United States was bound to be affected by powerful currents in its own public opinion—which is hostile to commitments—as well as by the quite unreal notion that the existing Arab regimes could be turned through friendliness and dollars into reliable supporters of American policies. The United States had contributed to getting Britain to lay down the burden of the Palestine mandate by its pressure in favor of the Jewish side in the conflict with the Arabs, but it had not been willing to contribute directly to the security of the Jewish state. It had assisted the liquidation of the British position at Suez in 1954, but its conduct during the long negotiations that followed Nasser's "nationalization" of the Canal had shown that it would not itself use anything more than persuasion to secure a settlement upon

which the Canal users could rely. If we had taken action despite America, it was because America had not been willing to act in pursuit of the general objectives which we shared with her.

I may perhaps now repeat the actual words with which I concluded my talk to our students on November 9.

It seems to me that what the government's critics have got to do is not to argue about this or that clause of the United Nations Charter, this or that understanding about the procedures in Anglo-American or in Commonwealth consultation; not to argue about sentiment, either for nationalism or for self-determination, but to answer certain concrete questions. Was the life of the State of Israel something which its citizens had the right to protect and which the rest of the world had the right to see protected? Assuming a government like Colonel Nasser's, which has achieved immense successes—our original withdrawal from the bases, the agreement over the Sudan—and which still continued to arm itself heavily and increasingly from Soviet sources; which proclaimed itself as about

to launch in the very near future a major war in the Middle East preparatory to destroying Western interests and building up this hostile coalition; was it reasonable to say that a British government which decided that in spite of everything, in spite of the fact that it knew it would get this kind of reaction, was prepared to act as it has rather than to wait, was it reasonable to say that even in all these circumstances the British government's action was not only wrong on this or that point, but morally outrageous?

I did not by any means convince my audience; I was arguing against a powerful current of opinion and sentiment. But nothing has happened since then to change my mind, whereas my reading of both British and American discussions of the whole problem does seem to reveal a growing understanding of my basic contention that in politics inaction may be as immoral as action, and that not all political questions can be solved through expressions of high-principled good will.